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**Romance in Foreign Accents:
Harlequin-Mills & Boon in Australia**

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Abstract

This paper is broadly interested in the adaptation and circulation of the mass-market romance genre, as one example of the publishing industry's production and distribution of cultural artifacts within and across national borders. To consider this, this paper focuses on the most successful mass-market romance publisher in the world, Harlequin-Mills & Boon, to ask the following questions: How has Harlequin-Mills & Boon, but particularly their international expansion into and operation in 'foreign' markets, been key to the contemporary success of the genre? What are some of the key strategies of the publisher's adaptation of the genre to new national markets, particularly in terms of issues of generic repetition and difference? What can Harlequin-Mills & Boon's negotiation of one national market, namely the Australian market, reveal about these questions in more detail? And how has the Australian office's recent shift from importing international content to commissioning local content signaled a critical shift in their adaptation of the genre to the national market? Ultimately, this paper proposes that these changes signal the publisher's entree into the creative economy and the Australian office's shift away from being a branch office and towards being a creative branch.

Introduction

The publishing industry has been one of the principal institutions for the production and distribution of cultural artifacts, if not since the fifteenth century, when a nascent transnational publishing industry developed across Western Europe, then certainly since the sixteenth century, when the industry began to emerge as a genuine mass medium (Pettegree 80). But while the emergence of mass-market publishing was certainly dependent upon the development of relevant printing technologies—which, according to Marshall McLuhan, allowed the publishing industry to become the first industry in the world to mass-produce cultural commodities (185-6)—the industry also relied, from the very beginning, on a suite of forms and practices designed to culturally court mass audiences.

One of those forms and practices was genre.

Genre is a consensual system of categorisation that privileges particular textual, intertextual, and extratextual conventions—such as plot, setting, style, author, series, brand, etc—over others; it is the “primary logic for popular fiction’s means of production, formal and industrial identification and critical evaluation” (Gelder 40). In a literary context, genre is discursively constituted in the tripartite negotiations between the publishing industry, its readers, and the cultural mores of a given time and place, and, as it does in other media industries, usually functions first and foremost as an industrial marketing device (McWilliam 237-9). By emphasising conventions over originality, genres provide both an “*horizon d’attente* (horizon of expectation) for readers and a *modèle d’écriture* (model of writing) for authors” within which “broad patterns” are repeated across texts and nuances negotiated within texts in an ongoing constitution of genre categories (Holmes 6). Like television formats, then, literary genres “constitute processes of systematization of difference within repetition” (Moran and Keane 200; Neale 51). But while genres are intuitively associated with the repetition of their conventions, the differences between genre texts are also “essential to the economy of genre” (Neale 22-3). Where repetition produces familiarity and interest in a genre, differences between texts, or specific variations of genre conventions, create interest in individual texts, thereby perpetuating the genre. Nevertheless, some genres, but none more so than the mass-market romance genre, are thought to be more repetitive and “convention-bound” than others (Gelder 43).

The Romance Genre

The romance genre is one of the most “profitable of all popular genres” in the history of mass-market publishing (Creed 100); in fact, for Lynne Pearce, it is the “most popular of *all* stories” (536). The genre itself originally emerged in twelfth-century France—though some critics claim that prototypical models of the genre existed in ancient Greece—but only developed into its current mass-market form in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Regis 4). Now, as then, the genre is defined by its thematic emphasis on love and its narrative focus on the re/formation of a (typically heterosexual) couple. The standard romance narrative, irrespective of sub-genre or cycle, progresses along three stages: the couple meet (or re-meet), negotiate “a series of obstacles both internal (psychological and emotional) and external (social and

material)", and either unite (for a happy ending) or separate (for an unhappy ending) (Holmes 6; see also McWilliam 2009b). Pamela Regis, however, claims that happy endings are not, as Diana Holmes suggests, one of two possible *dénouements* in the mass-market romance genre; instead, they are a necessity, because "readers insist on it" (9).

Commercially, of course, the genre has experienced one happy ending after another. After being "something of a phenomenon" in the Western publishing industry for the last three decades, or since the 1970s paperback revolution, it has reached still higher levels of success in recent years in the United States of America, United Kingdom, Europe, and Australia (Eike 25; RWA). In 2006-7, for example, romance was the largest selling fiction category in the United States, accounting for almost US\$1.4 billion in estimated revenue; this amount of revenue was the equivalent of 40 per cent of all popular fiction sales in the country and the majority, more than 50 per cent, of all mass-market paperback sales (RWA 2007; McLean 2008). But what can this extraordinary market success reveal, if anything, about the dynamics of change at play in the romance genre within and across national borders?

Aims

This paper is broadly interested in the adaptation and circulation of the mass-market romance genre. To consider this, I will discuss one publisher of the genre in, later in the paper, one market. Specifically, then, this paper focuses on the most successful mass-market romance publisher in the world, Harlequin-Mills & Boon, to ask the following questions: How has Harlequin-Mills & Boon, but particularly their international expansion into and operation in 'foreign' markets, been key to the contemporary success of the genre? What are some of the key strategies we can identify in the publisher's adaptation of the genre to new national markets, particularly in terms of issues of generic repetition and difference? What can Harlequin-Mills & Boon's negotiation of one national market, namely the Australian market, reveal about these questions in more detail? And how has the Australian office's recent shift from importing international content to producing local content signaled a critical shift in their adaptation of the genre to the national market? This paper offers answers to these questions.

Harlequin-Mills & Boon

In 2006-7, romance fiction accounted for almost US\$1.4 billion in revenue in the United States alone as the largest selling fiction category in the country; in those years, the top five publishers of romance fiction operating in the US included Random House, Penguin Group, HarperCollins, and Kensington (RWA 2007; McLean 2008). But the largest by far was Harlequin-Mills & Boon, earning over US\$410 million in (romance) sales in the United States alone (McLean 2008). In fact, Harlequin-Mills & Boon is the largest publisher of romance fiction in the world, a distinction it has held since 1981 or, extraordinarily, for more than two decades (McAleer 284-5). The company, with its stable of around 1300 authors worldwide, publishes more than 115 romance books each month in 26 languages and 109 international markets (H-MB 2006; see also Orr and Stout). These international markets are managed through the principal offices the

publisher maintains in Amsterdam, Athens, Budapest, Hamburg, Granges-Paccot, London, Madrid, Milan, New York, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, Stockholm, Sydney, Tokyo, Toronto, and Warsaw, and the licensing agreements it holds with companies in at least nine other countries. The publisher also has "outlets" around the world, including in "Malaysia, Singapore, Korea, the Philippines, Thailand and Eastern Europe" (Creed 100). And, with this broad commercial foundation in place, Harlequin Mills & Boon continues to grow: in 2005, the company sold 131 million books; in 2007, it sold more than 160 million with an estimated readership of 50 million, which is the equivalent of selling 5.5 books per second (H-MBA 2007a; H-MB 2006). But how did this publisher come to so thoroughly dominate mass-market romance publishing and what can its dominance reveal about their adaptive diffusion of the genre around the world?

Harlequin-Mills & Boon, as the dash suggests, is the result of a merger between two companies. Mills & Boon was founded in London in 1908 as an educational and general publisher. By the end of World War I, the company had established two strategies that would eventually contribute to its establishment as a major romance publisher. First, the company began to focus solely on romance fiction as a pragmatic response to the dramatic rationing of printing paper during the war; second, the company began to distribute increasing numbers of books to private lending libraries in the wake of the war, when readers' strained capital resulted in limited book sales (H-MBA 2007c). Romance fiction was an immediate success in this market and Mills & Boon were ideally placed to dominate it. In following decades, the company continued to grow and began to establish a presence in international markets: by the 1950s, for example, Mills & Boon was successfully selling their books in the United States, among other foreign markets. But it was shifts in purchasing habits in the 1960s and 70s that most profoundly effected the publisher's ultimate success and international influence on the genre: as readers' prosperity improved, lending libraries began to shut down as more and more readers opted to buy, rather than borrow their books (H-MBA 2007c; H-MB 2006). Facing a marked decrease in their traditional market, Mills & Boon turned to Harlequin Enterprises Ltd, their highly successful North American distributor, for assistance.

Harlequin Enterprises began as a general publisher in 1949 in Winnipeg, Canada under the comparatively inauspicious name of 'Harlequin Books'; within a decade, Harlequin had changed its name and narrowed its repertoire to focus solely on romantic fiction, which it imported from Mills & Boon (Capelle 192). However, unlike Mills & Boon, which balanced a moderate commercial interest with a "gentlemanly nature"—for example, older authors that began to sell fewer and fewer copies of their novels were kept on as "a kind of charity" or with a paternalistic goodwill towards the authors and the publisher's history (McAleer 7, 289)—Harlequin was aggressively business-minded, applying the mass-market techniques of other industries to publishing to great success. But while the Canadian publisher experienced strong growth in the 1960s, it grew exponentially in the 1970s and 80s: first through its 1971 acquisition of Mills & Boon and second through Torstar Corporation's 1975 purchase of a controlling interest in the company, only four years after the initial merger of the publishers (McAleer 284). While both Harlequin and Mills & Boon were influential publishers of the romance genre in the mid twentieth century—both, for example, were publishing or, in Harlequin's case, distributing in foreign (including foreign language) markets by the

1960s—the new company, now one organ of the giant Torstar Corporation conglomerate, experienced a period of even greater growth. This growth was based on three strategies:

- a renewed investigation of ways to market the romance genre;
- an experimentation with distribution possibilities (for instance, distributing free copies of novels in feminine napkin boxes and an aggressive focus on direct marketing, which continues to this day); and,
- an innovative expansion into international markets throughout Asia-Pacific and Europe (for example, when the Berlin Wall was destroyed in 1989, Harlequin's staff in West Germany were on-hand to distribute 750,000 free romance novels to the newly free women in East Germany, in a typically focused marketing exercise) (McAleer 284-5; McKay).

The latter is particularly interesting in light of the focus of this paper. Indeed, where both Harlequin and Mills & Boon, like most successful publishers at the time, penetrated international markets by publishing books in their home countries (Canada and England respectively) and exporting them to foreign markets, the Torstar Corporation facilitated a radical departure from industry norms. Instead of exporting books into international markets, "separate publishing companies were set up overseas to publish directly in the indigenous language" (McAleer 284-5). The decision allowed the company to decrease their distribution costs and introduce locally nuanced marketing for their products, with the earliest subsidiaries launched in Australia (1974) and Holland (1975) and other offices following soon after in France, Germany, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, and South America. The experiment was a success: by 1981 Harlequin-Mills & Boon had become the largest romance publisher in the world, leading to an unprecedented—and ongoing—diffusion of the mass-market romance genre into the Americas, Australasia, Europe, and the United Kingdom. "[P]opular romance publishers", but especially Harlequin-Mills & Boon, Creed notes, "have not been slow to take advantage of the global market" (100).

But with this commercial diffusion, where one national market after another was "saturated" with the product (see Capelle), came a critical backlash. Indeed, while Harlequin-Mills & Boon novels became the "base-line definition of romance", it was by no means a celebrated definition (Pearce 521). Harlequin-Mills & Boon's romance novels were, and are as commercially popular as they are critically loathed: according to Holmes, the mass-market romance genre was the most derided popular genre in the twentieth century (11-2). Worse, Harlequin-Mills & Boon was the "least likely" enunciation of the genre to "achieve any form of legitimacy" in the public imaginary (Holmes 11-2). Interestingly, both the most ardent detractors and the most ardent supporters explicated the genre in similar ways, revealing troubling public perceptions about the economy of the genre. Specifically, criticisms of the genre (e.g. Harlequin romance novels are "all the same") and, even, celebrations of it (e.g. Harlequin romance novels are "universal", "universally appealing", etc) both draw on a universalising discourse that casts Harlequin-Mills & Boon's enunciation of the mass-market romance genre as overwhelmingly repetitive, with underwhelming (if any) variations between texts (see Thomason, Creed 100, Pearce 521, Gallagher 114). Here, then, mass-market romance is widely conceived to be "much more tied to formula and convention", much

more "convention-bound", than other popular genres (Gelder 43; see also Worpole 33-4).

If genre is partially constituted in public discourse about it, then these perceptions point to a significant public concern about the ongoing viability of the genre: repetition is fundamental to genre, but so is variation. Yet, the romance genre's considerable success around the world suggests the exact opposite of any nay-saying public discourse: the genre is both repetitive *and* variant, because that is the necessary structural basis of any successful genre. As John Hartley notes, genre is a dynamic system that is constantly (re)constituted by new additions to it, such that the addition of one genre text automatically shifts and changes, however slightly, the boundaries and make-up of the genre as a whole (in O'Sullivan et al.). Hence, the romance genre's immense international popularity suggests that it has, perhaps more than most genres, continued to find ways to vary its conventions—by adapting and reworking its standards, or its model of writing—to meet the ongoing expectations of its tens of millions of readers worldwide. In other words, while the sites of repetition—the genre's conventions—do stay largely in place in most romance fiction, as in most popular genres, there are nevertheless important sites of variation in each text, irrespective of public sentiment. Even so, these public perceptions are of interest and might point to another, more pointed criticism about the publisher's negotiation of its creative and economic imperatives. To be precise, the universalising discourse circulating around Harlequin-Mills & Boon romance fiction might also be a implicit, even tacit criticism of the publisher's reliance on a mass communication/industrial economic model, in operating contexts that are increasingly literate about the value of human creative capital and the affordances of the creative economy; I return to this point later.

Harlequin and/in Australia

Harlequin-Mills & Boon established an office in Sydney, Australia in 1974, one of the first foreign offices to be launched amid Torstar Corporation's ambitious expansion plan. The expansion was key to the publisher's future: as the home market of North America neared capacity, "foreign outlets enable[d] Harlequin's sales abroad to increase steadily" (Capelle 2). Foreign income now represents the majority of the publisher's annual sales; in 2007, for example, more than 50% of the publisher's annual sales occurred outside of North America and more than 95% outside of its (Canadian) home market (H-MB 2006). These statistics are perhaps no surprise given the relative success of most of Harlequin's international offices. Harlequin-Mills & Boon's branch office in Holland, Netherlands, for instance, was opened in 1975—a year after the Sydney office—to test the national market for the potential expansion of the publisher. Despite a conservative launch, which saw only four new novels released into the Dutch market each month, the office was immediately successful. By 1984, 35 titles were published in Holland each month; a decade later, Harlequin-Mills & Boon dominated the national market, accounting for "roughly 90 percent of the Dutch turnover" (Capelle 93). Similarly, Harlequin-Mills & Boon conquered the romance market in France so quickly after the late 1970s opening of its Parisian office that local commentators described it as a "real social phenomenon" (Capelle 93).

The Sydney office's success has been comparatively modest, but no less effective. After opening in 1974, Harlequin-Mills & Boon Australia now turns over more than AU\$20 million per annum and dominates the romance fiction market, the largest segment of mass-market paperback fiction in the country (H-MBA 2007c). Maintaining a 20% market share of national paperback sales and a 90% share of 'women's fiction', the Sydney office publishes around 700 new books each year, an amount "second only to North America", and sells them at a rate of approximately 5 million books each year or over 400,000 each month (H-MBA 2007c). In doing so, Harlequin-Mills & Boon Australia are now the largest publisher of paperback fiction in the country, selling more than major competitors like HarperCollins, Penguin, Pan Macmillan, and Random House (H-MBA 2008; H-MBA 2007c). While neither the market share percentages nor the social celebrations are quite as dramatic as either the Dutch figures or the French commentary, Harlequin-Mills & Boon nevertheless dominates the Australian, and indeed the New Zealand markets too.

Of course, the opening of Harlequin-Mills & Boon's Sydney office was by no means the first time the publisher's books had reached Australian shores; Harlequin-Mills & Boon had been exporting their books into the country for a number of years previously and it was this existing level of product familiarity and success on which the Sydney office was expected to capitalise. The role of the new Sydney branch office, then, was to develop locally nuanced marketing strategies to vigorously distribute "Mills & Boon" romance fiction throughout the continent.¹ Like the publisher's other branches, Harlequin-Mills & Boon Australia developed and refined several innovations in its ongoing quest to improve their targeting and capture of the national market. But unlike offices in non-English speaking countries, such as Holland or Paris, where much of the focus is on literally translating works into the local language and conceptual system (see Capelle), the Australian office has tended to primarily develop innovations around improved service technologies. Three of their most significant innovations in diffusing the genre in the national market include:

- 1998: the Sydney office launched www.romance.net.au, the publisher's first web site anywhere in the world. The site featured basic information about the publisher, its authors, and its books and, significantly, a shopping feature, enabling readers to purchase a book online and have it delivered directly to them, thus translating the publisher's strength in direct marketing to the online environment (H-MBA 2007b);
- 2000: the office redeveloped www.romance.net.au into www.eHarlequin.com.au, the publisher's current web address, which was refined and adopted by Harlequin-Mills & Boon offices around the world, producing an internationally consistent brand identity and location online (H-MBA 2007b);
- 2008: the office launched an e-book range for PDAs (personal digital assistants), producing a range of new titles as instant digital downloads, making it the fastest way for readers to receive new titles. This innovation also addressed the brand's poor cultural reputation by simultaneously removing the 'embarrassment factor';

¹ At that stage, Australia and the United Kingdom still marketed the books under the anachronistic British branding of "Mills & Boon"; this practice changed in the 1990s, when the branding was changed to the company's proper title of "Harlequin-Mills & Boon".

by using PDAs to read Harlequin-Mills & Boon content, the books can be read in relative brand 'anonymity' (Newspup).

These innovations, among the largest developed by the Sydney office, are all focused on improving the publisher's targeting and capture of the national market; in other words, these innovations are heteronomous. Heteronomous innovations, as Pierre Bourdieu said of large-scale productions, are "favourable to those who dominate the field economically" (40). They court "mass audiences" by focusing on the "potentially immediate, broad-based distribution" of "conventions over originality" (Gelder 13). Harlequin-Mills & Boon Australia, more than any other publisher currently operating in the country, epitomises heteronomous production: not only is the publisher synonymous with the ('conventions over originality' of the) mass-market romance genre; their main innovations in the last decade have also all targeted improved service delivery (or the 'potentially immediate, broad-based distribution' of online shopping and digital downloads). These characteristics—the emphasis on improving profit, decreasing cost, and expanding product circulation, alongside the absence of any comparable marketing of the narrative or literary distinctions of mass-market romance—all suggest the publisher's embeddedness within the industrial economy and its one-way mass communication model. Indeed, the publishers' marketing also privileges brand over author name and pulps any books that are not sold within three months of publication (see Walsh), implying that the mass-market romance genre is a wholly disposable and creatively undervalued genre.

However, there are signs that the Sydney office is increasingly embracing the affordances of the creative economy: the most important signal of this was the branch's 2006 introduction of a local commissioning editor, the first in the branch's history. It is hard to overstate the significance of this hiring, in a branch whose approach to the content it distributed had not changed in its three decades of operation. Indeed, this was a crucial shift in the branch's approach to content specifically, and its approach to targeting the national market generally, not least because its parent company had traditionally been quite slow to pursue local content in its international markets. It was only, for example, in the 1980s that the publisher's North American headquarters began to acquire local content (or "purely American novels") after distributing British content for decades (Capelle 92). Progress was even slower in Australia: in 2004 Stuart MacDonald, Harlequin-Mills & Boon Australia's (then) Sales and Marketing Director, noted in an interview that the branch's "trend" was still "very much towards [. . .] drawing content from just one source", namely from either North America or England (RWAust). Titles were sometimes slightly altered for the Australian market—the "Desire" series, for example, was renamed from its original British "Sensual" moniker—but the branch rarely pre-empted "plans to change" series' names for the "Australian market", unless "the original name" was found not to give the branch its "maximum benefit in Australia" (RWAust). In other words, the branch's approach to the genre was usually retrospective, rather than pre-emptive, and based solely on a product's actual or perceived market success. Outside of these naming issues, content received little attention.

In 2006, however, the company hired its first Australian Commissioning Editor, signaling its tentative shift away from a branch office operation, which distributes

products created elsewhere, and towards a creative branch, which distributes products it has created. While Australian authors had featured among Harlequin-Mills & Boon's most successful authors for years, they had, until 2006, been commissioned through the publisher's North American or British editorial offices. The Sydney office's integration of creation into its existing distribution processes, however, indicated not only its shift towards a creative branch operation, but also its concomitant entree into the creative economy. Unlike the industrial economy, the creative economy "embraces the entire process from creating the artifact to its marketing, retailing and consumption", the last three of which the publisher had mastered since its 1974 Sydney opening (Rae 56). Moreover, in the rigid institutional structure of an industrial-era publisher, where national branch offices function as passive distributors of remotely generated content, the recasting of Harlequin-Mills & Boon's Sydney office into a creative branch also points towards the office's intention to interact directly with both their global publishing parent and their national market.

Only two years before the 2008 centenary of Mills & Boon, the Sydney office may have introduced yet another phase of the publisher's extraordinary diffusion of the mass-market romance genre in Australia.

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